

The Rascal Road: Crime, Prestige, and Development in Papua New Guinea

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One of my intentions in this article is to dispel some of the common untested assumptions that continue to inform both popular and academic discussions of “gang” activities in Papua New Guinea. The most prevalent of these is that gang members are predominantly from an uneducated and unemployed lumpenproletariat and in urban areas are products of squatter settlements peopled by migrants. Such assumptions significantly influence populist debate, for instance, on the value of sending settlement dwellers “back to their villages” as a solution to crime. The same assumptions guide highly publicized preventive strategies by police, such as periodic mass raids on squatter communities.¹ They also affect administrative policy such as the August 1993 Internal Security Act, with its contingent emphasis on carrying identity cards and repatriation of errant migrants.² Some derivative assumptions in academic commentaries are that gang crime is motivated by poverty or relative material deprivation (eg, Thompson and MacWilliam 1992, 172), or a degree of moral discontent (eg, Hart Nibbrig 1992).

Another of my intentions is to extend a theme introduced in a previous article, which argued that gang behavior manifested an integration of pre-capitalist social behavior into a cash-economic environment. I suggested, for instance, that the evolution of gangs in Port Moresby in particular could be interpreted as the evolution of a gift economy fed by crime (Goddard 1992, 30). An economic anthropological discussion provides a perspective on the distribution and consumption of stolen goods that may aid the understanding of alleged motivations to crime, and I hope to show that some prior commentaries, applying analytic models developed in the

context of western industrialism, have to some extent misapprehended a popular rhetoric of disadvantage.

The activities of criminal gangs in Papua New Guinea have been a sub-focus of debate about the country's "law and order problem," both in the popular press and in academic literature, for roughly two decades. Research literature on law and order has been partly motivated by the formal requirements of a chronic governmental search for a workable "solution," reaching its zenith in an exhaustive two-volume publication by the Institute of National Affairs in 1984 (Clifford, Morauta, and Stuart 1984). The analytic premises of law-and-order discourse inevitably overdetermine those of discussions of gang crime. The latter are consequently preoccupied with the effects of urbanization, unemployment, and social inequality. While there is now a large resource of academic (eg, Biles 1976; Morauta, ed 1986) and policy-oriented (eg, Morgan 1983; Clifford, Morauta, and Stuart 1984) literature on law and order, the component category of gang crime has received relatively little detailed analytic attention and little critique of the conventional analytic premises. Descriptive accounts have been short and have tended toward generalities from a minimum of presented data (Po'o 1975; Young 1976; Utulurea 1981), unless the criminal activity is approached in the context of an analytically prior research focus (eg, Wanek 1982), in which case the data have been select. The most substantial study has been that by Harris, who attempted a historical account of the rise of gangs and some predictions about their future (1988). Harris's discussion paper is based on his own interaction with gangs over a two-year period but presents a minimum of research data. This may be the result of the ethics of research among people liable to prosecution and of the need to establish trust through some guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality.

It is significant, I think, that in the literature on gang crime in Papua New Guinea theories of delinquency that evolved specifically in the era of advanced capitalism in industrialized countries are underrepresented. I am not proposing that these theories, which include for instance drift theory (Matza 1964), labeling theory (Schur 1973), and a body of theory focused on subcultural style (Hall and Jefferson 1977), are any more appropriate for analytical purposes in Papua New Guinea. What distinguishes them, in terms of the present discussion, is that they move away (to varying degrees) from a traditional emphasis on factors such as social disintegration, anomie, and relative poverty linked to urbanization. The

prevalence of the older theoretical formulations in discussions of gang crime in Papua New Guinea suggest an implicit subscription to either of two general and contrary models of the nature of capitalist penetration in third world countries. One of these is development theory, from whose viewpoint Papua New Guinea could be seen to be going through a specific phase of capitalist development typified by particular social problems already experienced in the industrialized west. Generalist theories of this kind imply a more or less inevitable pattern of "development" following a postulated western archetype (see, eg, Rostow 1960) and attended by unavoidable deviance and delinquency during a period of socially disruptive urbanization accompanying industrialization. The traditional opponents of development theory similarly focus on poverty as an overriding factor in the rise of street crime. Underdevelopment, or dependency, theorists view third world countries as relatively passive victims of capitalist exploitation, which is seen as destroying traditional economies and creating social inequalities that drive the poor to survive by any means available, including criminal activity (see, eg, Baran 1970).

Liberal populist commentary in Papua New Guinea synthesizes these themes in broad terms, with journalists and representatives of youth groups blaming the crime wave on a lack of employment opportunities for migrant youth and an inappropriate education system perpetuating colonially introduced ideas about schooling and preparing young people for types of jobs that do not exist (Kolma 1993; Nangoi 1993). Resonant with this approach is a point of view that sees crime as a reaction to perceived social inequalities in the country. For example, Hart Nibbrig, while acknowledging that criminals are not all from the ranks of the poor (1992, 119) has argued that "rascals"³ are driven by a sense of moral indignation at inequalities introduced by colonialism and structurally institutionalized in the postcolonial era (Hart Nibbrig 1992, 122-124). A folk version of the same view held by rural villagers in Papua New Guinea is reported by Kulick, who has documented representations of rascals in the discourse of villagers with no direct experience of them. The villagers believed that rascals were fighting "a kind of protracted guerilla war against corrupt politicians, greedy businessmen and obstructionist missionaries" (Kulick 1993, 9). Through discussions of rascals, villagers were able to express dissatisfaction with "post-colonial, capitalist and Christian influences that are causing increasing disruption in their lives" (Kulick 1993, 9-10).

Finally, the notion that rascalism is driven by a kind of moral imperative generated by social injustice is reinforced in the rhetoric of some of the rascals themselves. A "Robin Hood" attitude is frequently expressed by gang members as a justification for becoming involved in criminal activities. Criminals I spoke with in the course of research commonly invoked a polemic that politicians and the elite in general were the "real" criminals and that gang activities served the needs of the poor and dispossessed. Gang activity was implicitly heroic banditry and thus largely justified, and a sojourn in prison was seen as demonstrating the injustice of society. An academic precedent for Robin Hood imagery is provided by Reay (1982, 626), who portrayed highland gang leaders as philanthropists, paying a tariff if they sleep in someone's house, giving handouts to unfortunates met on the road, and so on. Morauta has commented acutely, however, that "Criminals have learned that academics, bureaucrats and politicians find poverty and unemployment partly acceptable excuses for crime" (1986, 11).

These academic, journalistic, and folk images of street criminals integrate compellingly into an impressionistic whole. However, the conglomerate picture of rascals as organic heroes of the lumpenproletariat, or delinquent avengers battling sociopolitical injustice, reflects neither the wide variety of crimes actually incorporated by current local usage of terms like *gangs* or *rascals*, nor the socioeconomic position of most of the victims of crime. Rascalism during the late colonial era was identified mostly in terms of the concerns of the colonizers. In the white-dominated urban areas "rascals" were indigenes who committed petty offenses such as minor burglaries that could retrospectively be liberally interpreted as underclass crimes. In contrast, the designations "rascal" or "gang member" in contemporary Papua New Guinea embrace juvenile pickpockets and street-corner thugs along with recidivist murderers and well-organized groups carrying out meticulously planned major heists. The majority of victims of crime—most of it unreported (Clifford, Morauta, and Stuart 1984, 1:15, 30)—are poor, victims of muggings for the sake of a modest pay packet (the price of a few beers for attackers), female victims of roadside abduction and rape who do not have the luxury of traveling relatively safely in a car, victims of theft from their relatively unprotected homes. While some people are driven to crime by extreme material deprivation, there are no hard data to suggest that they are proportionately represented in rascalism to the extent suggested by the fore-

going interpretations. Rascals come from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, and many of those engaged in the more spectacular forms of crime have graduated through a range of minor criminal activities that victimize the poor.

CASE STUDIES

A selection of six short sketches from interviews with prison inmates (I have changed their names) incarcerated for “major” crimes illustrates the variety of origins and expressed motives of people engaged in rascals in Papua New Guinea. The interviews were conducted by myself and a research colleague, criminologist Anou Borrey, at Bomana Gaol, the country’s largest prison, just outside the capital city, Port Moresby, over a period of several weeks in 1991. Through the gaol’s administration, we extended an invitation to any inmates to speak informally with us, under guarantee of anonymity, emphasizing that we wanted to interview “gang members.” Bomana Gaol has a high-security section, but generally conforms to westerners’ ideas of a prison farm, with high wire rather than brick walls, and prisoners spending most of their time in the open air. We sat at a shaded table a little distant from the main administration block, thereby ensuring confidentiality. The interviews were open-ended conversations that did not follow a strict questionnaire format, and interviewees were invited to talk about themselves and their crimes as they wished. Because self-identifying “gang members” were eager to be interviewed, they formed a small queue and provided a steady stream of interviewees. In all, we interviewed fifty people. Recidivist and hardened criminals, regarding themselves as “big-men” (see Goddard 1992) or would-be big-men, tended to present themselves boldly and cooperatively, ahead of “minor” criminals, for interviews.⁴

Sylvester

Sylvester was married with two children, and in his mid-twenties. He was supporting his parents and his wife’s parents. He told me he was educated to grade 6, but prison records gave grade 10. At the time of the interview he was serving a six-year sentence (reduced under appeal from an initial twelve years) on charges of armed robbery and attempted murder. Prison records listed him as a high-risk inmate, and he had been put in the high-security block in a gaol in another province after it was discovered he

was planning an escape. Sylvester first became involved in crime as a child, picking pockets in the streets of a provincial town to get easy money. He graduated to more serious crimes and was associated with the provincial "branch" of one of the major gangs that grew in Port Moresby. He continued with criminal activities after getting a skilled-labor job and marrying, because he wanted to make money and "enjoy" the excitement of crime. He did not save stolen money, but spent it on a good time. Arms were easy to obtain, usually through theft, and Sylvester graduated to well-planned armed robberies. Some of these were "contracted," he said—that is, somebody would ask him to get a commodity item, for which he would be paid. He showed no remorse for his lifestyle, and referred to it at one point as "just a living." He regarded prison as part of the criminal lifestyle. Prisoners were beaten up when first caught and once in prison learned to become better criminals from other inmates. He boasted that he could escape if he wanted to⁵ and would do so if he received word of a particularly lucrative robbery being planned. Sylvester felt he had achieved status through his crimes and incarceration and said he would return to crime on his release. He said if he gave up crime "people will think I am scared." The death penalty was being mooted in parliament when Sylvester was interviewed; he commented that if it were implemented it would make the "law and order" situation worse. Gangs would be obliged to kill potential witnesses, he said. He also felt it would escalate the violent potential in criminals like himself: "They'll get me in the end, but I'll kill innocent people first."

Alphonse

Alphonse was aged about thirty according to himself, or twenty-two according to prison records. He was married but separated and trying to organize a divorce. He told me he had no children, but prison records stated that he had two.⁶ He was educated to grade 6. At the time of the interview he was involved in an appeal against a lengthy sentence on robbery and kidnapping charges. He had a long list of convictions and a lengthy record of escapes and incarceration in maximum security as a high-risk prisoner and mastermind who had considerable influence over other inmates. Alphonse's involvement in crime began with petty theft at the age of thirteen, escalating through car theft and breaking and entering to major robberies and drug dealing. He regarded himself as a hard-core criminal and had taken part in amnesty-style conferences with police and

politicians trying to solve the "law and order" problem. He expressed a commitment to a life of crime, which he regarded as lucrative. Being in gaol did not bother him; he saw it as part of the lifestyle, along with the beatings from police when he was captured and the bullet scars he carried from shoot-outs and police pursuits. Alphonse claimed that being in prison did not exclude him from criminal activity, as crimes could be planned from inside gaol. He had an extensive network of contacts and boasted that he could escape more or less at will if he wanted to take part in a crime. Money he obtained from crime was not saved, but used immediately and shared with other people. The proposed death penalty did not bother him or deter him from further crime. He now considered he had no other lifestyle and would continue with crime into the foreseeable future. His separation from his wife was instigated by himself on the grounds that he could not be both a successful criminal and a family man at the same time.

Chuck

Chuck was twenty-two or twenty-three, and married with one child. He was serving a substantial sentence for armed robbery, with time added for escaping. Chuck was brought up in a Port Moresby suburb and did not know the language of his natal group, but did not classify himself ethnically as a Port Moresby or "Central District" person, because of his parentage. He began stealing as a child—a chocolate bar from a supermarket. He was thrown out of school at grade 6 for bad behavior. He could give no particular reason for becoming involved in crime at such an early age. His crimes progressed to breaking and entering and robbery, and by his own estimation he had been in jail nearly a dozen times. He enjoyed crime as a lifestyle, and had been legitimately employed only once, for a short period as a storekeeper. Like a number of other interviewees he referred to his activities as "playing crime" and adopted a "macho" attitude when talking about the inevitable beating at the hands of police whenever he was caught, using the locally popular quasi-aphoristic phrase "one-day pain" in dismissing the discomfort. He used guns in the commission of crimes and said he would have no hesitation in shooting someone who did not cooperate with his demands in a holdup. Although still relatively young, Chuck had successfully organized a number of fairly major robberies and ran his own small criminal group. Having escaped from police custody and from gaol, and spent time in

maximum security, he regarded himself as a tough hard-core criminal and saw no change in his lifestyle in the foreseeable future.

Nat

Nat was twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, educated to grade 9, and had several wives. He was currently serving a long sentence for robbery with violence. Prison documents listed him as a high-risk detainee—a mastermind with considerable influence over other prisoners. Nat began his criminal activities in his late teens, with car theft and burglary, working his way up to armed robbery. In his early career he stole guns and used them to hold up stores. He said he did not like the idea of killing people, and regarded his use of guns as a way of frightening people. (Nat's attitude contrasted with most of the other people interviewed, who said they would not hesitate to fire if their victims did not immediately cooperate.) He gave up crime a couple of times and got legitimate work as a salesman, storekeeper, and small-time business entrepreneur, but was not satisfied with the money he was earning, so returned to a criminal lifestyle. He did not save money from his crimes, but spent it on a good time. He preferred stealing money to stealing goods, because money could be used for immediate gratification. Unlike many other inmates who spoke with us, Nat expressed an aversion to rape as a gang activity. He said that in his criminal behavior he kept a narrow focus on getting cash. He was happy with gang life and would continue with it.

Lou

Lou was a single man in his mid-thirties, who was currently serving a long sentence for armed robbery. He had some university-level education, having flunked a bachelor's degree. He obtained clerical employment in Port Moresby and found himself under considerable pressure from kin who became dependent on him for financial support. He could not save money and could not find a job that paid enough to satisfy the financial demands of his kin. He eventually attempted to go back to university as a self-funding student. At this point, in an effort to get quick money to pay his way through university, he became involved in crime. He was caught taking part in a robbery, and sentenced. Although the robbery was a gang job, and Lou had a reasonably close association with his fellow criminals, he did not express the same commitment to a life of crime as most of the other interviewees. He still had hopes of going back to university at the end of his prison term, but said there would be finan-

cial problems that might propel him into crime again. (Despite his rationalization of his criminal activity as an almost regrettable necessity in the face of financial hardship, Lou was one of the most expansive of interviewees, discussing criminal techniques at length, in great detail, and with relish.)

Bud

Bud was twenty-four years old, single, an adopted child, with a formal education to grade 8. He was serving a three-year sentence for rape and had a previous conviction for armed robbery. He was listed as a high-risk detainee in prison records, "inciting" other prisoners in previous incarcerations. Bud said in interviews that he had a "bad attitude" at school and dropped out in his early teens. His adoptive mother was angry with him and threw him out of the house. He joined a group of young troublemakers and became involved in petty theft, which led to his first recorded offense, for illegal use of a motor vehicle. He was employed as a shop assistant and warehouse worker, but said his commitment to crime developed from finding a role-model for himself in the local gang leader. In interviews, Bud compared himself to young people finding role-models in sports personalities or celebrities. Despite this declaration and his testimony that he dropped out of school and had been employed, Bud blamed the education system, politicians, social inequality, lack of opportunities, and lack of rehabilitation programs in prisons for his lifestyle. He said he would continue his criminal lifestyle after his release and saw no alternative open to him. He said he would like to become a better-organized criminal and learn some accounting and management skills so he could operate a more businesslike criminal gang.

The purpose of selecting these cases is to disrupt the image of criminals as proletarian avengers (or, contrarily, as a proletarian menace) by demonstrating a variety in the types of people engaged in crime as a lifestyle. However, there are some thematic links among the examples. By their own accounts, five of these men began "playing crime" as children and graduated through more serious offenses. Minor shoplifting, picking pockets, and the like seem to have been matters of opportunity rather than socioeconomic necessity. Most of the interviewees spoke as if they had committed themselves to a life of crime, which they regarded as lucrative, even though they had the opportunity of conventional employment. Further, although the spoils of crime were sometimes large, they

were consumed, one way or another, very quickly (usually in group binges—see Goddard 1992, 29), rather than saved or invested in relatively durable symbols of wealth (fancy cars, clothing, etc). In concert, these observations bring into question the contention that material poverty is a predominant motivational factor. This revision must be reconciled with the rhetoric referred to earlier and exemplified by Bud, which at first sight seems to appeal to an uncomplicated perception of socioeconomic disparities between rich and poor.

Two significant ideational factors must be analyzed at this point. One is Papua New Guinean conceptions of the relationship that ought to prevail between individuals with desirable resources and those with whom they customarily interact through kin-group or exchange ties. The other is the way in which the majority of Papua New Guineans conceive the phenomenon of “development,” which is partly manifest in the disparities they perceive, and which has passed into the country’s lingua francas (Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu) virtually unchanged from its English-language representation. These two factors can be brought together in the context of crime through a discussion based on the observation that gang behavior integrates precapitalist social relations into a cash-economic environment (Goddard 1992).

GIFT ECONOMY

A number of observers have written about the similarity between gang leaders and Melanesian big-men (eg, Harris 1988, 26–27; Hart Nibbrig 1992, 117). In her critique of the romanticizing of criminals, Morauta observed that where Robin Hood (in legend at least) gave his gifts to the poor as a class, the Papua New Guinean criminal gives to particular individuals, marking personal rather than class relationships (1986, 11). I have argued that gang leaders are entrepreneurs who gain status and support through an escalating success in crime and the redistribution of stolen goods (usually money) in gestures of largesse to family members and lesser criminals. In return they are able to mobilize support in criminal activity from people who are indebted to them (Goddard 1992, 27–29). In other words, they are big-men in a crime-fed gift economy that involves social relations typical of precapitalist Melanesian societies in general (although the criminal activity itself is not typical of precapitalist societies). Most of the more successful criminals I have spoken with have

been proud of their influence and status among their peers and have perceived themselves as big-men of crime. Some of them have appropriate nicknames associated with terms of address customarily used of clan leaders and respected elder kin.

This behavior invokes a familiar complex of interaction, based on kin and exchange ties, that has been an analytic preoccupation of anthropologists since Malinowski's *kula* observations and his attempt to typologize relationships of obligation (1966, 166-194). It prevails in the face of "westernization" and transcends ethnographic distinctions between highland and lowland or chiefly and nonchiefly societies. Recent comparative studies have demonstrated its variations rather than its relative absence or presence (Feil 1987; Godelier 1986; Knauff 1993, 67-85). In Port Moresby, where people from a huge diversity of micro-ethnic groups are thrown together, the competition for jobs, promotion, accommodation, and other needs is fraught with accusations (often very well founded) of "wantokism"—the favoring of near and distant kin.⁷

The gift is a fundamental component of this complex, a vehicle of obligation and, often simultaneously, of prestige. Even Malinowski's example of a "free gift" from Trobriand father to son was paradoxically "a repayment for the man's relationship to the son's mother" (Malinowski 1966, 179). Gregory contrasted alienable rights over property in commodity-producing societies with the inalienability of things produced in "clan-based" societies, and, following Mauss (1954), described gift exchange as "an exchange of inalienable things between persons who are in a state of reciprocal dependence" (1982, 19). Further, the gift economy is a debt economy, in which the acquisition of gift-debtors, rather than the maximization of profit, is the principal aim. "What a gift transactor desires is the personal relationships that the exchange of gifts creates, and not the things themselves" (Gregory 1982, 19). On ceremonial pig exchanges in the highlands, Feil has commented, "Highlanders themselves continually allude to the social and political dimensions of the act of exchange. . . . The production of valuables, on the other hand, holds no real interest. . . . Production is mundane, compared to the ceremonial prestations to which some societies are forever geared" (1987, 269). In Hau'ofa's lowland Mekeo ethnography, after a presentation of food to an exchange partner at a formal ceremony, the giver commented "Now I have given him a burden" (Hau'ofa 1981, 155).

In competitive (incremental) gift exchange, such as the ceremonial *tee*

and *moka* of the highlands, the function of the gift in maintaining and enhancing prestige is writ large; magnanimity denotes both clan wealth and the big-man's ability to persuade his kin to entrust him with its dispersal, and immediately challenges the prestige of the receiving party. In balanced (nonincremental) gift exchange—typically found in elder-led societies (see Gregory 1982, 53–55)—prestige is often dealt with more circumspectly (see, eg, Hau'ofa 1981, 154ff). In either case, the burden of obligation is clear, and ceremonial gifts in particular articulate the two forms of obligation—between kin, whose cooperation makes the gift possible, and between exchange partners.

In the formal political sphere of postcolonial Papua New Guinea, this complex of obligations is a dominant factor in electioneering. Despite the legal prohibitions packaged into the Westminster system that the country has inherited, favors are publicly and extensively dispensed by candidates and expected by voters (see, eg, Mailau 1989, 91; Standish 1983, 108–109); they are glossed in Tok Pisin as *gris* (blandishments, bribery, persuasion); and kin ties are an important factor in the manipulation of support. Standish encapsulated the process and its problems aptly in his notes on the highland politician Iambakey Okuk, who (among many things) blatantly gave allies and former opponents posts in government organizations and his own “development” corporation and

complained that his constituents were draining him of funds with their constant requests for contributions towards death payments, bride wealth and so on, a traditional aspect of the big-man's role. In all this, he was creating obligations that must, by custom, be repaid; but he did so amongst those who were unable to reciprocate in kind, which creates a sense of unease amongst Melanesians. At once obligated and grateful, they were thus drawn into his camp, and many eventually became active members of his faction. This process occurs in all political arenas at all times: there are no free lunches. (Standish 1983, 88)

Later, when Okuk lost an election, despite a notorious distribution of 4000 cartons of beer (96,000 bottles) to all comers on the Kundiawa airstrip in Simbu Province just before an election liquor ban came into force, Standish suggested that a lapse in gift-debt strategy may have partly contributed to the loss: “Gifts which are so large and undirected are unrepayable and hence do not incur an obligation, so that the recipient can take without feeling obliged to make a return. . . . Perhaps, to coin a new term, a ‘mega bigman’ is no longer a bigman” (1989, 203).

According to Gregory (1982, 116–117) the endurance of the gift economy in the face of capitalism is materially based on the persistence of clan ownership of land, which has prevented the emergence on a large scale of a landless proletariat and has preserved clan-based social organization.⁸ Colonial and neocolonial intervention has resulted not in the destruction of a traditional economy but in the development of an “ambiguous” economy, where “things are now gifts, now commodities, depending on the social context” (Gregory 1982, 117). The transformation of commodities into gifts, that is, the appropriation of products of capitalism for prestige through distribution and display is, of course, not confined to such instances as the incorporation of cash, beer, and other western items into ceremonial exchanges and election campaigns. It is evident through a spectrum of social behavior, including crime, where the proceeds are consumed or shared (often at the same time, as orgiastic beer drinking is a popular sequel to a successful operation⁹) to enhance prestige, repay previous gifting, and engender future obligation (Goddard 1992, 29–30). Moreover, the appropriation of the paraphernalia of capitalism into the gift economy extends to the incorporation of material symbols of “development” in general.

“DEVELOPMENT”

Despite its familiarity, the concept of development is opaque, even to its entrepreneurs, because its referents, such as economic growth and quality of life, are themselves stipulatively elusive. Definition of the concept is difficult (Muingnepe 1987; Tapari 1988, 4), and among its discussants in the Papua New Guinean context tends to be by ostension (see, eg, Hughes and Thirlwall 1988). To most Papua New Guineans, in contrast, the concept presents itself simply and tangibly. Particularly in rural areas, the Tok Pisin transliteration *developmen* connotes cash, infrastructure, and services such as schools and medical centers. However, their acquisition is often influenced by complexities of prestige and obligation that are rarely anticipated by development planners. As “development” is central to state policy, and development “projects” on a large and small scale are prolific, a great deal of literature is devoted to the progress of all kinds of ventures, and much of it records instances of projects involving local communities or individuals that appear to survive without evolving from an embryonic state, or that collapse after promising beginnings (King 1990; Tapari 1988).

Local communities' perceptions of success or failure, however, are often based on criteria considerably removed from those of development agents and their consultants. An apt illustration from the late colonial era is provided by Lawson's account of Kyaka Enga community efforts to establish a school in 1970. The sum of \$1000 (Australian currency was still being used) was collected; the building of the school used \$300. Although the school needed books, pencils, and other equipment, the remaining \$700 was spent on lavish feasting. The Kyaka did not regard this as waste. "They claim that the whole venture is valuable as an investment in prestige. The feast itself was of great significance, and the permanent structure remains as a lasting reminder of their achievement" (Lawson 1971, 10). Lawson also commented on local enterprises in trading and transport that did not appear to be successful in terms of profit. "The interesting thing is that these enterprises do not seem to be regarded as failures by the people concerned. . . . Trade stores carry an extremely limited range of items and have an absurdly slow turnover. Despite this, at my field site there are three separate trade stores, all sharing the same building" (1971, 10).

In his study of Gorokan involvement in business enterprises in the late 1960s, Finney argued that three motives were evident—profit, service (to the local community), and prestige.

The quest for the prestige gained by owning and operating a store, a trucking venture, or some other enterprise is probably the most important investment motive to consider in understanding the Gorokan propensity to invest. . . . the bigger and more visible the capital asset, such as a five-ton truck or a modern road-side store, the more attractive and prestigious is the investment to the Gorokans. . . . When the truck is purchased, the very act of buying is made dramatic. For example, a man with a truck bank account will withdraw all his funds in cash and then triumphantly plunk the notes down on the truck dealer's desk. (Finney 1973, 80–81)

Finney, like Lawson, also drew attention to the phenomenon of the pursuit of profit being neglected in favor of the prestige of simply owning a business (1973, 146–171).

Monsell-Davis, discussing small business among the Papuan Roro, commented on motives for business ventures: "If the profit sought from the enterprise is primarily prestige . . . then once the owner has achieved his political ends he may not be too particular about what happens to his

venture" (1981, 330). He also noted the tension between individual profit and community obligations: "the individual village business-man may only expand his ventures to the position where he and his fellows all recognise some mutual gain—although this may not be a conscious process" (1981, 326). This is the complement of prestige: the individual is obliged to share the benefits of achievement with the community, which is likely to have contributed to the initial capital accumulation in the first place. Finney provided an archetypal scene, the newly acquired passenger truck, carrying clansmen of the proprietary group rather than paying passengers (1973, 82). The obverse is the obligation of the community toward the individual who has brought services and prestige to it. Mangi gave an example of reprisal in the negative case—supporters of losing election candidates in the highlands destroying government outstations and schools, which they claimed their candidate had been responsible for constructing or improving (1992, 112).

The tangle of prestige, obligation, entrepreneurship, and state services is Gordian. Development projects, especially those with community input, whether they be small businesses or infrastructure, become enmeshed in local variants of the general gift economy whose permutations are impenetrable from the point of view of "economic growth." Stephenson gave an excellent example of a rural youth group engaged in development projects that served as vehicles for power and prestige struggles in the village community, where the group was intimately linked to a particular individual attempting to establish himself as a potential community leader (1987, 58–64). If there is one distinct articulating factor in this dense phenomenon, it is cash. Borrey, in a discussion of rural highland attitudes to "development," echoed an observation by Strathern that the populist desire for development amounts to a desire for "money in their hands" (Strathern 1976, 1, cited in Borrey 1993, 10). She observed that a preoccupation among young people is finding money to buy beer (1993, 7) and commented of males, "The common aspirational model seems to be the public servant who is characterised in the community as the person with a fortnightly income, who has a car, at least one woman, and money to buy beer. Through handing out beer to other community members he is able to buy popularity and respect" (Borrey 1993, 10). The desire for cash in hand, to be consumed immediately through group activities like alcohol binges, reflects the expectation that items will be shared one way or another, that the group as a whole should share in the prestige of the

individual, that businesspeople, politicians, public servants, or anyone else with access to prestige items will behave like traditional leaders, big-men, or chiefs, repaying old debts, creating new ones with their generosity. The state, its development projects, national politics, are all drawn into this system, in which individual entrepreneurs mediate with varying success between commodity and gift economies.

Borrey has suggested that the highland communities in which she has conducted criminological research have given the state a "big-man role" (1993, 9-10), that is, the state is regarded as a manipulator and distributor of wealth in the ideational context of familiar systems of exchange and obligation. A consequence of this situation is frustration when the state and its agents do not fulfill customary expectations of the way socioeconomic relations should be conducted. As cash (the most versatile, therefore the most useful, item of "development") and material symbols of prestige are the tangible goals in most communities in Papua New Guinea in respect of development, it should surprise no one that a major preoccupation is exploring ways of acquiring these things through initiating relationships with a seemingly recalcitrant state. In the Papua New Guinean idiom, finding a "road to development" is a common expression (see, eg, Filer 1990, 85n, 87), and communities and individuals try various strategies, including *rot bilong bisnis* (Tok Pisin: the business way), *rot bilong lotu* (the religious way, that is, involvement in fund-raising church activities), and *rot bilong raskol* (the criminal way).¹⁰ For example, a recent strategy that has met with mixed success has been youth group "walkathons." These groups contrive to get by various means from their home areas to Port Moresby (arduous trips of hundreds of kilometers), hoping for wide press coverage and meetings with politicians, whom they then ask for funds for "projects" in their villages. The first publicized effort of this nature earned the group involved K5000, and a government-chartered flight back across the country to the group's home area in the Simbu Province, where they were welcomed as celebrities. While the novelty and newsworthiness of the trip contributed to its success, the strategy is not proving usable in the long run, and subsequent efforts by other youth groups have met with disappointment. The prospect of a flood of youth groups arriving in the capital expecting to be feted, accommodated, and given money has caused a backlash in the media.¹¹

In the absence of adherence to the ideology of capitalism, these differ-

ent strategies are regarded as having equal legitimacy in terms of the desired goal. The term *wok* in Tok Pisin, though obviously a transliteration of *work*, means any goal-oriented activity and does not recognize distinctions in this regard between, for instance, crime, manipulation of kin ties, business entrepreneurship, or manual labor. Further, as noted earlier, clan-based social organization persists in Papua New Guinea, and landholding social groups are still the dominant form of community. Consequently, the impact of ideologies associated with the commitment of labor predominantly to commodity production is relatively weak. Meillassoux contended that in agricultural societies where the social relations of production are kin ordered, labor has no exchange value, because its products are not immediately alienated from the producer into a generalized sphere of exchange where goods can be measured in terms of one another (1978, 144–146). It follows (in contrast to capitalist ideology) that labor alone cannot enhance status, because in such societies labor-power cannot be a commodity (Meillassoux 1978, 144–146). Although Meillassoux's formulation (based on African fieldwork) requires qualification in respect of precapitalist Papua New Guinea,¹² it is relevant to the general case that status is not achieved through increased individual production, but through the skilled manipulation of resources and social relationships.

CRIME AS WOK

I have attempted to demonstrate in this discussion the tendency in Papua New Guinea for the paraphernalia of capitalism, from simple commodities to “development,” to be appropriated into a gift economy where issues of prestige and obligation prevail over profit and individual accumulation of wealth. Returning to gang activity, a criminal lifestyle constitutes one option or expedient among many through which aspects of the cash economy can be incorporated into the pursuit of prestige and relationships of obligation—an alternative option of “legitimate” employment was foregone or discarded in most of the six examples presented earlier. Crime is *wok* like other goal-oriented activity. Among the peers of the criminal, prestige can be gained, and obligation engendered, by skillful gifting and manipulation, no less than in the case of the business entrepreneur or successful politician.

By the application of this perspective on motivations to criminal life-

styles, some sense can be made of a phenomenon that many commentators on crime do not address: the group conversion of "committed" criminals. A common occurrence in Papua New Guinea is the sudden mass "surrender" of large groups of criminals to authorities. It usually entails a public conversion to (charismatic or fundamentalist) Christianity, the handing over of guns and ammunition to the police, public apology for past crimes, and often (despite the criminals' history of serious offenses including violence and occasionally killings) a waiving of any prosecutions.¹³ These conversions are highly charged affairs surrounded by publicity and acclaim for the converts, who subsequently form themselves into "ex-criminal groups," with coordinators or leaders who preach peace and harmony through the media and seek funds for various projects.¹⁴ In effect, one strategy to achieve prestige is abandoned in favor of another.

If commitment to a criminal lifestyle is engendered (for, strictly speaking, this can no longer be regarded as a matter of "motivation") by the factors described here, rather than by material poverty or indignation at institutionalized social inequality, the rhetoric of disadvantage commonly iterated by criminals themselves cannot be accepted at face value. I agree with Morauta's observation (1986) that it courts sympathy, but I also consider that it borrows from a simplistic class-based polemic to express indignation of a different order. It is not the comparative wealth of an elite, or the structural inequalities perpetuated by the state, that many Papua New Guineans (the rhetoric is not confined to criminals) find offensive; it is the occasional tendency of such parties to default on the system of obligations that underscores social relationships in Melanesia. The relative personal success and wealth of individuals is acceptable if they are seen to operate within this system, gifting, repaying or engendering debts, enabling kin and prospective exchange partners to maintain customary relationships that can be exploited one way or another. The posthumous status of Iambakey Okuk as a folk hero throughout the highlands is to a large extent due to his ability for most of his career to remain a part of the gift-economic system while achieving national prominence. Parties who remove themselves from this system, or refuse to become part of it, are hindrances to a dynamic social process and induce frustration and resentment. The real import of the rhetoric of disadvantage is, I think, encapsulated in a cynical comment to me by a gaoled criminal who

had once done a "job" for a prominent citizen. "So now I am in gaol. Where is he?"

At the beginning of this discussion I said that the analytic premises of law-and-order discourse in Papua New Guinea generally overdetermine those of discussions of gang crime. The analysis offered here contributes very little to a search for solutions to the country's law-and-order problem, whose investigators are conventionally preoccupied with finding criminogenic factors in developmental problems such as urbanization¹⁵ and unemployment. The suggestion that criminal lifestyles represent not a response to unemployment, miseducation, or material poverty, but a strategy in pursuit of prestige and an appropriation of commodities into a gift economy represents a paradigm shift. Models developed initially in response to criminological issues that arise from the transformation of social relations of production accompanying the growth and spread of industrial capitalism are inadequate in a situation where peripheral capitalism engages a precapitalist mode of production whose social relations prove comparatively resilient in the encounter.

Rascalism in Papua New Guinea is undoubtedly a "law and order" problem: it is disruptive, often very violent, and victimizes innocent people. Rascals I have spoken with show little concern for the people (rich or, more often, relatively poor) they steal from, mug, rape, or kill. However, to interpret their behavior as part of the pathology of development, or underdevelopment, is to underestimate the dynamic and creative nature of social responses to capitalism. The dispersal of goods, and mostly cash, by interviewed gang members in pursuit of status or prestige, their choice to pursue a career in crime when other more "orthodox" economic options are available to them, the clamor of Bomana prison inmates to relate their exploits and present themselves as "big-men," evoke ethnographically familiar Melanesian socioeconomic behavior, rather than desperate underclass responses to problems of development. The "gang" phenomenon in Papua New Guinea cannot be adequately explained in terms of general motivational themes such as poverty, social disintegration, or moral imperatives generated by perceptions of social inequalities, as is demonstrated by the briefly sketched careers and attitudes of the six criminals presented earlier. Instead, I suggest that rascalism is an issue of a problematic encounter between a cash economy and a generalized gift economy shared by a constellation of communities whose

social relations remain stubbornly rooted in kin-ordered modes of production.

Notes

1 This strategy is also supported by the superficial observation that pursued criminals flee into settlements. The assumption that they all live there habitually is mistaken. It is easier to shake off pursuers through these labyrinthine areas than through well-ordered and high-fenced suburban housing.

2 At time of writing the Internal Security Act is under legal challenge on the ground that it is unconstitutional.

3 The Tok Pisin word *raskol* originally had the same connotations as the English-language word from which it is derived, but has come to be used of anyone regularly engaged in crime, excluding white-collar crime.

4 The interviews were the beginning of an ongoing research project, which has involved an informal coalition between Borrey, Sinclair Dinnen, and myself. Neither Borrey nor Dinnen was involved in writing this article, but I benefited from discussions with them and with Michael Monsell-Davis, and from comments by Nancy Bowers and Jean Kennedy on an early draft.

5 This is not an idle boast. Papua New Guinea's gaols have poor security in general, and individual and mass escapes from them are common.

6 It is impossible to know which is correct, as prison records are generally inadequate, apart from descriptions of charges, length of sentence, and the like. The information presented in these sketches is extremely condensed and follows much rechecking and cross-checking of the stories volunteered by prisoners who were often keen to impress.

7 The Tok Pisin term *wantok* originally referred to shared language (more than seven hundred different languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea), but has become an elastic term denoting anything from shared kin-group membership to shared provincial or regional origins, depending on geopolitical circumstances. A handy discussion of the origins and modern extension of wantokism and of its burdens for people in urban employment has been provided by Monsell-Davis (1993).

8 While this connotes kin-ordered production, I do not want to suggest that labor in such communities has always been exclusively communal or group activity (a romantic contrast, in other words, to western "individualism")—nor, I am sure, would Gregory.

9 Commodities stolen are mostly converted into cash by selling them very quickly, often at prices that are a fraction of their real value (which is usually

known to the thieves). Even money from major heists, involving thousands of kina, is drunk away in a bewilderingly short period.

10 Filer, who suggested this be called "road theory," mooted *rot bilong kastom* (custom), *rot bilong kaunsil* (councils), and *rot bilong kago* (cargo, that is, material goods) as other possibilities (1990, 85–86n). This phraseology, of course, evokes Lawrence's publication *Road Belong Cargo* (1964), but should not be taken to imply that I subscribe to Lawrence's explanation of "cargo cults."

11 See, for examples of the "walkathons" and the response, "Journey for Help Ends, No Sign of Any as Yet," PNG *Post-Courier*, Wednesday, 13 October 1993, 20; "It's a Long Way to Moresby, with Nothing to Show for It," *Post-Courier*, Tuesday, 9 November 1993, 3; "Stop These 'Walkathons'," *Post-Courier*, Tuesday, 9 November 1993, 10 (editorial).

12 I am thinking, for example, of gender-based divisions of labor and the analytic problem of the value of women's labor in gardening and childbearing in the context of interclan exchange relations.

13 See, for example, "Gangsters Vow to Change Their Old Ways," PNG *Post-Courier*, Friday, 8 October 1993, 13; "Sixty-five Young Men Surrender to Police," *Post-Courier*, Thursday, 28 October 1993, 15.

14 In 1986, while doing fieldwork in the highlands (not on rascalism) I encountered a group of young men on the Highlands Highway wearing T-shirts bearing slogans announcing them to be ex-criminals for Christ. More recent examples can be found in "Ex-rascals Share Joy of Independence," PNG *Post-Courier*, Tuesday, 5 October 1993, 17; and "'Bad Guy' Vows to Help in Fight against Crime," *Post-Courier*, Tuesday, 19 October 1993.

15 Statistics regarding urbanization in Papua New Guinea are no more reliable than those on crime, but some evidence suggests that the rate of urbanization is not as great as many people assume and may therefore be a misdirection of criminological attention. Hayes has pointed out that even using a "generous definition" of "urban"—minimum population of 500 persons and density of about 200 persons per square kilometer—85 percent of Papua New Guinea's population still classify as "rural" (1992, 2–3). He also argued that the rate of urbanization has in fact slowed down in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and suggested that a review of the role of urbanization in Papua New Guinea's development is urgently needed (1992, 4–11).

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Abstract

This article critiques analyses that interpret gang crime, or "rascalism," in Papua New Guinea as an underclass phenomenon. Illustrative sketches of gang members' lifestyles and expressed attitudes toward their own criminal behavior are

used to demonstrate a variety of social backgrounds and individual reasons for pursuing a criminal career. Themes suggested by these sketches are explored through a discussion of the Melanesian gift economy and common indigenous understandings of the concept of development. That concept tends to be apprehended by Papua New Guineans in terms of the gift economy, with its complex integration of issues of reciprocity, socioeconomic obligation, status, and prestige.

Parallels are drawn between the behavior and attitudes of rascals and the ethnographically familiar patterns of behavior by Papua New Guineans associated with the pursuit of status and prestige through the manipulation of relationships of reciprocation and obligation. The "rascal" lifestyle is interpreted as a strategy for pursuing prestige and the appropriation of commodities into a gift economy. Rather than view rascalism as a product of poverty and unemployment generated by processes of development or underdevelopment, it is analytically useful to consider it as an issue of the problematic encounter between a cash economy and an enduring, robust gift economy.